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Explaining Poetry to the Open Heart

Matthew Wayne Larrimore
Old Dominion University

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EXPLAINING POETRY TO AN OPEN HEART

by

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ABSTRACT

EXPLAINING POETRY TO AN OPEN HEART

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Old Dominion University, 2016
Director: Professor Timothy S Seibles

“Explaining Poetry to the Open Heart” is a creative writing thesis of poetry. It makes use of lyric and narrative poems that utilize sound, imagery, and other creative devices in order to communicate the narrator’s relationships with place, others, and self to the reader. A shifting point of view alternately restricts and expands the reader’s perspective in order to direct attention toward the reader’s own perceptions of the narrator, the world, and ultimately herself.

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I

Modern Creation Story

The sun shucks the void of darkness;
the empty world shivers in nakedness.
With ribbons of dashed lined asphalt,
wide and narrow, I wrap it all in intersections,
exit ramps, superhighways forking off then rejoining.

The roads weep tears of tar at their loneliness,
I forge cars and trucks, large and small –
Red, metallic blue, and pearl, all the colors,
2 door, 4 door, hatchback, $\frac{3}{4}$ ton, crew cab
flatbed, the wreckers, the rigs, the RVs, all of them, everywhere.

No places to stop, to unload.
The vehicles sigh clouds of carbon monoxide.
Rest stops and gas stations I erect at intersections,
exit ramps, dress it all in road signs and traffic lights.
Around them spring villages, towns, great concrete cities.

Empty and confused the places wonder why they exist.
I populate them, Mothers and Children in diapers
holding bottles, Fathers pushing their offspring
on swings and Teachers with books and white boards,
Firemen and Mayors, one with her gavel at a wide conference table.
The empty spots I fill with Lawyers, Janitors, Doctors,
folks standing in line at the mission, everyone, everywhere.

The people look around at the places, roads, and cars,
wonder at the emptiness; where is beauty?
I green the grass, spring flowers yellow and red,
grow tall leafy trees that stretch to the sky. I pile
the mountains, furrow the rivers, ladle the lakes.

Then I inspire painted canvasses and walls,
sculpted stone and bronze –
compose harmony, melody, lyrics
strengthen voices, drums, guitar, piano,
literature, books short and long, plays,
poems, poems, poems.

The Bridle of Babylon

Thus always to tyrants.

I who surveyed Xerxes: King of Heroes,
as he sullied the holy temple of Babylon,
sobbed as he cast down its burning cantors
of myrtled oil, wept as the golden god Bel,
protector of the city toppled. Golden Bel stolen
and melted into a shimmering metallic pool.

Bel's Temple where I held a woolly ram,
the sacrifice for victory
as the general chanted the words,
where I blessed the father as he
poured out dark gouts of spicy red wine
for the health of his newborn son,
and the farmer as he spilled a bulging sack of seed
for a stand of barley and crops of wheat.
I steadied the old mother as she offered a dove
for the marriage of her daughter.
Oh god! In this, your day, there is power unrivaled.

I hid as Xerxes defiled Bel into a golden crown,
watched as they crowned, not the King of Babylon,
but the King of all Persia and Medea,
and plotted as he claimed, King of Kings, King of Nations.

In the end, even this king falls to an assassins' blade.

Celebrating

The crowd chants
USA USA USA
as the news flashes on their phones,
gathering in front of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave,
USA USA USA.

May 2nd 1 am 2011 SEAL Team Six
assaults the Bin Laden compound,
slaughtering Osama and four others.

I watch students from Georgetown
spew onto the National Mall,
celebrating death
as if their team won a championship.

Across the country,
people pour into city streets
to cheer SEAL Team Six's
success over a sleeping family.

In the aftermath we learn:
a AK 47 lay on Bin Laden's shelf
with a pistol. The oldest son,
rising to defend his mother,
shot dead, with the rest.

Afterward, facial recognition software
confirmed Bin Laden's identity.

Truce

Build a pyre of wood,
start with tinder. Help me
pile on dry sticks as fuel

to melt the icy years.
Lay on the splintered logs
to light the inky dark that divides.

Come rest by the blaze.
We'll wash wounds clean,
wrap them in linen of understanding.

We'll fill the air between us
with footings, piers, and arches
over the dark chasm.

Come, build with me.

Dominican Resort

Michael's smile warms you
like the morning Caribbean sun.
He's a "please and thank you"
young man, *You're nice people*,
as he checks you in.
I'll take care of you, he does.

Calcium carbonate walkways
lead from guest rooms to dining rooms,
coral structures cut from ocean
form the path, check-in to beach.

At lunch, Michael will seat you
below blown glass light fixtures
at tables adorned with golden flatware.
Enjoy your meal, and you do.

Polyps clustered in groups,
secreted the calcium that became
polished stone below your feet,
swirls of tan, ripples of pink, fans of bone.

After dinner, though oversized windows,
you can catch glimpses of Michael
busing half-filled plates and lipstick marked glasses.

Coral reefs occupy less
than 0.1% of the ocean's surface,
but provide a home for a quarter
of all marine species.

It's midnight when Michael boards
the unairconditioned bus
for the hour ride home.
It's the same bus he boards just
past seven am, six times a week
to afford his two-room apartment
in the suburbs of Santo Domingo.

More than Minutes

Is a day more than a collection
of minutes one after another?
Just twenty-four hours:
the clock, your watch,
some dark, some light, a bone face
with silver numbers,
black hands, sixty seconds
at a time, 1440 minutes one after another?

Can we let a day be more
than the things we did?
A trip for apples and creamer,
past traffic piled up for two cars
and an ambulance, stopping to mail
a smooth brown box for \$12.55,
dropping off two linen shirts, a red tie
with a mustard stain.

Can it be more
than a story you make up,
Waiting for the elevator;
the sideways glance
noticing the tension in someone's eyes?

Forget the hour learning
how to prepare Chicken Kiev
from some TV Chef.
Leave behind the mail:
bills, and pleas for money to save
the children or abandoned cats.
Shake off the yawn.

Awake, stand up,
Get in the car, catch the bus.
Do not avoid the soaking rain,
the cutting wind. Visit family, friends,
next door, across town, share laughter
like you did long ago.
Go find the one that got away.
Embrace them as they answer the door.
Do that thing you dread.
Time flees like dreams in daylight. Do it now.

They Believe

they live in the fallen down ruins
of post-consumer capitalism
they learned about in twenty weeks
of community college before dropping out.

They sit at home in Hello Kitty tees,
pound the comments on YouTube,
tweet their thumbs raw telling
everyone about the media conspiracy
to keep the masses stupefied, on their iPhones
logged into an “open” network.
They head to their job at Staples.

They think they live in silicon cities
on data superhighways
you can't drive down,
divided by miles, united by
Tumblr, Instagram, or Pinterest.

They never consider the confusion
created one nation under pixels
divided into zeros and ones.
Their texting dropped their calls
to Grandma and their best friend
from grade school.

A neglected blog:
a post from last month –
*“taking a break until
my connection clears up.”*
A pic of the once-accounted-for cats
nesting in a grey sweater captioned,
‘purr-furing cotton over wool.’

A few likes, a haha instead of lol and ;)
a halfhearted status update
from the dude down the street, a digital
“how about that weather” or
“I hate ~~school, work, my wife and kids~~ life.”

Alone, unfriended and unfollowed,
in their digital ghost town.

Biology of Longboarding

A young man studies
a long-boarder cruising across campus.

He doesn't blink as she rides a dip
in the sidewalk, leans over
her board into the slight curve,
the weight of her body
pulling her down the slope
before she pushes her hips
back to finish the soft S motion.

The way her dark brown hair
whips and flutters in the wind,
which presses her loose t-shirt
into a form-fitting drape
revealing her lithe shape,
makes him swallow hard.

He tries to imagine the feel
of her smooth skin under his finger tips
as it shines in the sunlight
while she carves down the walkway's crown.

Cascade of Bricks

After being pillars for each other,
after what they'd been through,
he left without a word, suddenly
like a struck match.
The ember of her hurt
charred its way to her center.
hollow as an abandoned factory,
she smoked and smoldered,
wore an open window smile,
laughed like a fan at the front door.
Burning from the inside, no one knew,
its blackened insides,
until a strong gust of wind
hit her at the right angle.
Then the bricks fell

from
three stories
up, smashing a car
and mailbox into a smoldering
dusty heap, that blocked traffic at Colonial and Caroline.

To Guide and Show the Way
The Virginian Pilot
 January 28th 2015
 Our 150th Year

“Pilots” sit in stacks. waiting
 on wire racks, hyping civil
 rights and the budget hikes.
 Grilling great grub for the big
 game, fights for space below
 the fold with the weather
 forecast, and a full color ad,
The Best Bank in Town, The
 president shouts, protect what
 you own with one dollar
 down.

But we have lost the value of
 a “Pilot.” Few care how ships
 reach their port captained
 around reefs and sandbars.
 Instead they divest
 responsibility to the GPS.

Lost are apprenticeships
 learning bay and tide through
 years of experience, gained to
 guide men and cargo safely to
 their destination replaced by
 silicon, copper wires, and
 satellites. The value of what
 they did taken by time and
 technology.

We let “Pilots” sit in stacks
 and wait on wire racks to be
 recycled. We prefer our news
 from CNN.com or Google
 Reviews, a blog post at time,
 apt for adult attention spans,
 sound bites fit for space
 allowed, 140 characters at a
 time, for the spot next to a
 banner ad. Local Editors and
 Reporters, audience and
 neighborhood savvy replaced

with RSS services, Reuters,
and AP subscriptions.

Choose Your Own Ending (End Times Sestina)

Everything that begins, draws to an end.
 We race toward it, the end of our world.
 The certain nearness of the apocalypse,
 all of it, everything, vanished in a flash.
 Heed the warnings, leave your eyes open
 for the end, the coming horror.

Anticipate blazing death from the sky; horror.
 A mountain of stone, avalanche at the end,
 seventeen miles-a-second will open
 a hole in the crust of our world.
 Blind in an instant, brighter than a nova –flash –,
 no escape from the coming apocalypse.

We'll cause the coming apocalypse,
 squabbling toward our own horror.
 Hate, greed, envy, war will begin with a flash
 of gunfire, bombs, clouds of gas will mark the end.
 Humans will evaporate from the face of the world,
 for others we leave this world open.

In prophesy, the seventh seal opens
 at the appointed time for the Apocalypse.
 A final judgment upon the World;
 at the end God will unloose the final horror.
 They pray for it, all things come to an end,
 all of creation gone in a flash.

Still others imagine a brilliant flash,
 a moment of genius, the flood gates open,
 white lab coats, petri dishes to usher the end.
 They herald our end in a viral apocalypse.
 The last of us witness the diseased horror,
 The last gasps of humans in a wasted world.

Not bang but fizzle, the end to our world,
 in the far flung future, no moment, no flash.
 Stars flicker out; behold their frozen horror.
 They say the end will open
 to black sky, universal apocalypse
 with a whimper at the end.

But the world scoffs at minds open
 to the coming flash, deny the apocalypse,

resist the inevitable horror, ignore the coming end.

II

Ode to Bacon Cheese Burger

O' Bacon Cheese Burger I adore you.
My eyes feast upon your tempting beauty.
I envy the bun that holds you so close,
as you lounge upon a bed of lettuce.
Flames have perfectly caressed your patty.
Your golden cheese melted so smooth, so sharp.
Smokey bacon adorns your luscious form.
I desire to consume you wholly,
even as your juices run down my chin.

Oh Bacon Cheese Burger

Oh Bacon Cheese Burger
I can no longer love you,
cannot indulge in crispy bacon,
sharp cheddar, or your flame-caressed patty.
Do not tempt me with your luscious form,
you can no longer be mine.
Though try you may to lure me to your bed
of crisp lettuce and juicy tomato,
I must resist. I still long to hold you,
revel as your juices weep down my chin,
but my LDLs and triglycerides
are through the roof. Goodbye,
cruel meat; cruel, sumptuous, fire kissed patty.

BBQ Sundae

The pulled pork my brother devoured wholly,
polished off the last of that tangy goodness
then with a gaping mouth that watered
from slow roasting and smoky sauces
made the chicken vanish too. Who invited him?
I marveled at his gluttony, inhaling
a perfectly seasoned T-bone, medium rare,
our good potato salad, down his hatch.

Then he searched for our dessert; quickly
I hid the two lattice blueberry pies,
shuddering at his ravenous maw.
I spoke coyly to him of Waldorf salad.
Untempted by apples, celery, and
mayo he left to pursue a large gelato.

Bend

Bend don't break your mind.

Bend the rules, bend
the truth, the laws,
Fort Bend Oregon
to bend it like Beckham
then tie a sheet bend in it.

Bend over
backwards,
Short Bend Missouri,
bend bars with your bare
hands, bend a note
on your harmonica,
slow down on that
bend in the road
on your way to Big
Bend National Park.

Learn the six steps
to bend wood, pipe,
and tubing by hand,
South Bend Indiana,
stop on the bend in the river
on your way to Bend
Brewing Company
so you can bend
your elbow.

Washing Machine Repair

She's smoking hot.
She drives me crazy,
every time she jerks on,
I smell her melting belts.

Appliance repair is a joke.
All they want to do is get
through my front door,
charge me \$75 just to come
out, do nothing but talk,
and tell me to replace it.
Screw them! I'm not
taking it in the ass this time.

I spend an hour
in a darkened room,
with the door closed
surfing the back alleyways
of the web, looking for what I need.
Finally, I find just the right stuff –
a motor coupler;
three pieces of black on white
oiled-up rubber and plastic
with a stout metal sleeve
so this one doesn't go limp
before it's done its job.

I leave \$39.95 for Whirlpool
and don't bother to look back.
Three days later, a brown box arrives,
I prepare for my exertions.

The machine sits in a cramped
sweaty corner of the apartment.
The laundry room door comes off
its hinges, I heave the dryer out
making space for my effort.

Rocking the washer onto her back,
her feet in the air,
three clamps
and twelve screws
grudgingly give access.
The parts are a puzzle

that take more hands than I have.
Eventually, the hoses hook up,
the cord plugs in, she starts,
sputters, seizes up,
as cold as a witches tit.

I stand back take a deep breath
scrape the grease from under my nails
look for a cigarette,
grab a load of underwear
and head to the Laundromat.

From the Alternate Catholic Book of Prayer

Glory be
to the coffee bean,
to its ripening,
and to the holy harvest.

As it was
in the picking
it is roasted, and ever shall be
heavenly without end.

Glory be
to the maker,
to the glass carafe,
and to the filtered water.

As it is
slowly dripping,
and is now steadily pooling
to be sipped for ever and ever.

Glory be
to the mug
to the sugar,
and to the half-and-half.

As it is
eagerly poured,
is now savored,
soon gone
until tomorrow morning.

AMEN

Dear Stapler,

Do you remember that stack of papers
so fat we couldn't push through,
embarrassedly self-shuffling looking for a clip?

Dear Staple,
How about that resume?
Just a few sheets of premium paper
you crumpled on impact,
a twisted jumble of silver angles?

Dear Stapler,
I always wanted to know
what it felt like to run out of
the thing that makes you the most you.

Dear Staple,
Do you care that it's your job
to fasten parts together
like some butcher surgeon of cellulose,
here to save them from nothing
more than losing pages?

Dear Stapler,
No more then you care
sitting there day after day
doing that same job
stupefied deaf, dumb, blind.

Dear Staple,
How can you live with yourself
knowing that your whole existence
is forced on you, that your whole purpose
is to be shaped by and for something else?

Dear Stapler,
I have to admit, even I prefer
the soft curves of a clip.
I never cared to rip and tear
my way through and around,
or shred a whole corner as I leave.

Wishes for Lazy Students
After Lucile Clifton

I wish them written exams.
I wish them a dull pencil
and three out of four essay questions.
I wish them no multiple choice.

I wish them a power outage,
no battery in their alarm
and living across campus.
I wish them forgetting the room number.

Next, I wish them un-bought text books
and study partners who are misinformed.
Let the text books be online but let
the network be down. Let the study
partners sell back their book too soon.

With time running out let
them believe they've done
the best they could,
and then let them find
the last five questions on the back.

III

Small Place

One ordered corn bread and chili,
another the grilled salmon
on a bed of greens, the third
pretzels with cheese and mustard.
All three had a dark red draft of the local brew.

But, being disappointed by the lack of beans,
they bought corn dogs, Mountain Dew,
a box of wine, and blueberry yogurt.

They climbed a close-by hill
after sunset to see this new town
sparkle at night, like light on water,
to toast it with the box of wine,

but it was a city of darkness,
only a gas station, a few porch lights
visible from their vantage.

Quietly they drank in the growing dark.
Then, the light display began.
Pin pricks of blue-white emerged
on the background of darkness.
One of the three knew where Mars was.
Another spotted a shooting star, and long
after the wine was gone, the third
spied the glowing spine of the Milky Way.

In early morning with pounding heads
they headed home, but took with them
their small place among
the uncountable diamond specks of night.

Mountain Sunset

A bluish pallor overcomes
the crowded parking lot.
Folks look up to watch
the never to be seen again
one of a kind, end-of-day
light show in the sky.

The glow plays along the mist
of the overcast summer evening.
Shoppers seem to hold their breath –
the cars, plastic bags,
and carts, all freeze.

Magenta, blue, and mauve
Line the rutted, furrowed underside
of roiling cloud that stretches
horizon to horizon,
curtaining valleys and peaks.

But the evening breeze chases
camera toting gawkers
with the scent of rain.
They've never seen the mountain
awash in gold just before
our sphere of light gives way to night.

Phoenix

- *After Sandburg's Chicago*

Blast Furnace of the Nation,
 Blight Maker, Rejector of Immigrants,
 Denier of Opportunity and Dream-spoiler,
 desolated, wasted, languid,
 City of Obstinace
 Pheonix

I am the mad man cursing silently,
 cursing the wind, the reckless brutal sun, sneering at the wasteland you created kept from water's
 saving coolness, arguing across scorched fields of hopelessness over your blast furnace of
 rejection, City of Obstinace.

I call you killing field. Deny me, but I have seen your ruins, walls of brick and iron crushing
 those who seek asylum. You answer with papers to keep me out, do not care to hear the cries of
 those who need you; your own leaders, students, and neighbors.

And I tell you, you are a brutal desert giving only thirst to the burgeoning potential of who you
 reject. I know their faces, the clear light in their eyes even after a day of shouldering asphalt up
 ladders. I watch as they survive on scraps that would starve a coyote and hear their laughter as
 they play with their children on the sandy playgrounds in your wasteland of hopelessness.

You show us other places that sneer and argue, point to other cities that ignore and waste, other
 cities also blind and deaf, leaving your daughters and sons embarrassed and flushed. You resist
 their pleading like a heat struck animal pulling away from the waters that will save you from
 desiccation, fumbling, failing, starting, failing again.

You are lost in the desert under the dusty haboob, cracking lips yelling curses, mouths full of
 sand, rejecting laws that pull and plead you, sun-scoured face yelling curses, spitting, cursing
 under your breath, at a country that will not heed you.

Aching Hands

I'm grateful my hands type
poems, scratch out notes,
pull up my pants, zip my
zippers, pet the dog, feed the fish.

Lately, my hands power a move,
fifteen miles one place to the other.
They pick up box after box, grip the dolly,
load the accumulation of twenty
two years, a dozen trips via car
so I can take my time, "save" the U-Haul rental.

Despite gloves,
boxes and furniture
catch, pinch, and bend
fingers and wrists the wrong way.

When it's sorted, when the sofa,
the TV, and the dining room table
have found their resting places,
after we've achieved feng shui,
I'll visit storage, Goodwill,
and this time I swear, the dumpster.

For now, every time I flex
or make a fist, my joints snap and pop
like a masochistic bowl of cereal.
They feel like raw meat hooks,
open wounds at the end of my arms.
The throbbing keeps me up at night.

Yet I would not trade this
for cradling idle joints,
handling a rifle, busting greasy knuckles
on a wrench, gripping a pick ax,
or mending barbed wire fences.

When I've finished I'll cheerfully
type and retype lines and stanzas,
grade paper after essay after test,
smooth the silk of my little brown dog's ear
and hold my beloved close in the quiet of night.

Grand Canyon Sunrise

A dish of undefined misty blue yawns
below as 2 tan and black hummingbirds
tend to the center of red petals.
I feel the light recede
just before our blazing furnace of fire
breaks the horizon.

Dawn reveals the rim and red and brown
stone, ribbons like edges of blankets
laid down over eons. The light unveils
oblong angular Battleship Rock.
It has witnessed this scene
since before even the natives arrived.

The moon fades but never leaves.
Thousands of feet below
the winding trail to Bright Angel Lodge
makes its way among the dark green pinion
and blue tinted sage.

I glimpse the Colorado,
carver of cliffs that keep the canyon
floor in shade until noon. But
by then I'll have left for the leafy green
of the east and sunrises over water.

Obituaries and Packing Tape

We spend hours packing for the move
carefully wrapping
lamp after vase after shelf
in plastic, pour squeaky peanuts
in nearly full boxes so nothing shifts.

Down to that last of it,
I resort to old newspapers
to protect the picture frames.

“In memoriam of Gertrude Williams,
a loving wife, a faithful friend,”
swaddles my smiling memories
of whitewater in Wyoming.

Martin Dorsey shelters
squinting smirks in the Arizona sun
“an educator dedicated to the community.”

Aunt Gert, Cousin Martin, thanks for your help.

IV

Raven

1.

Trapped in the body of a black winged bird,
I dreamt a curved ragged beak for a mouth,
twisted charcoal claws for feet,
large graceful wings for arms,
covered in sleek black feathers.

Remembering my former self
my wife's touch on my cheek,
ten fingers, the taste of beer and bread,
I struggled to free myself without success.

2,

The Raven a myth to more than one people:
bringer of omens, a cleaner of corpses –
actor upon the world,
shaper of destinies,
thief of the Stars and Moon.
Trickster, manipulator, gifter of the Sun –
even a myth needs the land.

3.

Ravens keep vigil over the dumpster
in back of the Mandarin Buffet
the keen-eyed, carrion-eaters
arrayed in iridescent black
croak with a trill that sounds like a laugh
when they find a fat treat.

They watch then scatter when approached.
I call to them with a click of my tongue.
They pay attention once in a while, call back.
I find their feathers, long and ruffled,
as if they have left them for me.

Too Early for Breakfast

After a night of camping close
 to the lake, on a last minute campsite
 none too level, none too shaded,
 none too private, in a tent; too small,
 too orange, and by the hour before
 dawn too wet to lay sleepless in any longer,
 I leave the tent, take my sleeping bag
 for warmth to doze in a camp lounge chair.

Too early for breakfast, I watch
 pale blue light outline a few pines.
 I doze for minutes, then hear rustling
 hurrying up the hill toward me.
 Looking toward a stand of aspen,
 I expect to see some early
 morning camper heading for a pre-dawn pee.

Instead two elk fawn come skittering
 to a halt as they enter my clearing.
 As big as ponies, their white spots fading
 into the cream-brown of their coming adulthood,
 two yearlings newly emancipated
 from mother. I surprise them. They sniff
 the morning air cautiously,
 their wet black noses twitching.

I freeze, slow my breathing. After a few minutes
 their stiff tension subsides. I want to call
 my wife but know they will flee if I stir
 or make a sound. They begin to nose
 the ground. One moves off right,
 the other straight toward me then left.
 I whisper my wife's name into the crisp
 morning air. Their heads lift just a moment
 and go back to their search.

The nearly identical yearlings
 inspect patches of mountain wildflowers
 munching as they go. I watch one disappear
 behind a bush. Moments later the other pauses
 perhaps realizing he's alone and
 heads after his sister. I hear them crashing
 through the brush as I look for our frying pan.

Alone with the Parakeet
For Kebab

A slice of pumpernickel, a napkin,
a spoon, my steaming bowl
of split pea soup, the perfect pick-me-up
on a cold winter's evening.
For company, my winged companion, Kebab,
the eight year old bird watches
snow pile up outside our window.

Despite his habit to chew on the chair
and steal keys, I parole the yardbird.
I make him a place, a plate of silky, black millet,
nothing but the best for my friend.

The expert at splitting,
and spitting picks a seed
with his curved grey beak, but loses interest.

The table top j-walker waddles over,
considers me with one shiny black eye.

Yes Kebab?

As if taunting, he turns away
hops into my bowl, and back out again,
scalded by my steaming soup.

Fearful for the bird's health,
I scoop him up, clean him off
check for injury, but he's just startled.

I return to my dinner.
pull my chair up to the window,
place the bird in his cage,
and gnaw on pumpernickel
as we watch the snow fall in silence.

Doggy Dreams

After a day of barking at joggers'
ankles, rolling in bird carcasses,

after sit and stay or just protecting treats
from the cat, claiming Mom by laying on her feet,

after stashing gloves between the cushions of the couch,
guarding the apartment from Pizza Delivery,

after a windy walk to sniff the mail box,
a dinner of kibble and hoovering lost crumbs,

after walking circles again and again,
what disturbs your sleep, little brown dog?

Do you dream of getting the new "sit pretty"
trick just right as you whine in your sleep,

maybe swimming in the waves at the beach
as you kick, or finally catching that fat squirrel

just before he makes it to the old red oak.

For Pippen

She dozed in her bed the day before
in front of the patio door
looking outside, watching
the high grass she once stalked.

Last evening she lost use of her hind legs,
the legs that used to set her soaring
after an unlucky robin.
Then, her front legs
went limp around midnight.

I made a nest in her favorite chair;
she purred and napped.
Her keen eyes that once glowed
in darkness went dim.

She was calm
as long as she felt me
rubbing her ears,
and reading the paper out loud.

When daddy called,
I put him on speaker,
and she perked up,
a small swish of her tail.

I counted two decades of mornings
Pippen kept me company
while I sipped my Peco.

There'd be no one
to nuzzle me awake for breakfast,
to groom the back of my fingers
as if they were hers too,
no one to greet me at the door
to lead me to her empty water bowl.

No more wavering meeew when hungry
or purrr as she nosed my fingers
for a scratch, no tap at the window
when it was time to come in, no unlucky mice.

No standing in the cool night air calling her home.

Killing Weasa

Last year I hand fed her barley
keeping her weight up through winter.
Her gray-spotted sticky tongue
touched my hand. Her breath
and black and white mass
held off the cold of the February barn
like a low banked fire.

For 18 years, she endured
my rough cracked hands and gave
milk so fresh you could taste grass
in summer and alfalfa in winter.
Three and half gallons a day, every day
until this season.
She hardly filled a bucket
the last time I milked her.

Named after Aunt Louisa,
her daily gift made our house
a home. She gave milk for ice cream
every June for my wife's birthday,
cream for the butter churn
and my coffee, milk bottles for my children,
only asked for a pitchfork of fresh hay,
maybe some leftover green beans
from our dinner table.

Her hip bones and ribs
protruded by the end.
The butcher came with his son,
brought his shotgun. I could not watch.

I stayed in the house, scrubbed and washed
everything in sight, recalling
how my little Jessy tied a blue bow
around her neck when she was 7,
and taking a belt to Bill's ass
the time I caught him
trying to ride the poor girl.

There'll be stew meat
in our freezer that I won't eat.

V

Beauty and the Beach

The Rayleigh effect
scatters high frequency light,
colors the sky blue,
tinges our star red in a sunset
that highlights her in bronze brilliance
as if she is the only light
on this afternoon beach.

Solar radiation warms the water
more slowly than the land.
Temperature differences
create an on-shore breeze
that flutters her hair
catching the twinkle of flaxen-sand.

The water reflects the blue-green
portion of the spectrum
that matches her eyes
as if they too are oceans.

The Sump

I can't hear a thing
the radio crackles
as I sit in the car.

I replay our argument,
relive the words,
replacing each one
until the outcome changes.

The curve of your face
floats under my fingertips.
I recall our last kiss,
emptiness surges like
a stream in a rainstorm.
I feel your embrace,
now the swollen creek
sweeps sticks and branches
from muddy banks.

The water collects at the storm-drain,
chokes the siphon. The flood gathers
into a lake large enough to swallow
my backyard, to lap my door.

Even after the water recedes, I'm left
bailing the basement for days.

Infertility

The nursery I never painted green then repainted yellow,
the diapers I didn't change at 3am;
no colic, earaches or croup,
but I see the pink chubby fingers that never grasped mine.

I did not set frogs free from shoeboxes after bedtime,
nor miss giving piggy-back rides they were too big for.
We never watched Disney's Robin Hood from the floor or played
with red Mustangs and black Camaro Matchbox cars,
nor heard infectious giggles fill my home.

I did not forget to bring her flowers on opening night,
didn't wait until sixteen to teach him to throw a curve ball.
I never gave them hints on parallel parking,
but I can feel the flaxen hair I never brushed from their faces.

A white lace veil I never lifted for her groom.
The reception speech I didn't stumble through.
Births, baptisms, first communions, confirmations.
Speckled pools of evening sky in which I never saw their mother.

Evolution Practice

As I walk the dog from shade to shade,
on a sunny July mid-morning, two
Japanese beetles lie on the sidewalk,
foundering on their backs. The underside
of the winged sumos, green and gold armor,
gleams in the light; legs kick, wings jitter.

Bachelor bugs combat for
some fair beetle maiden-mama.
These scarab cousins' struggle
allows only the fittest's genes to fly.

The first to right himself crawls off
into the grass. The second flips himself again,
his bright belly shining in the sun.
I leave him to destiny.
Already, the songbirds eye him,
beaks watering.

He Calls Me Uncle

though I'm the only dad he's ever known.
He points to each stone and butterfly
as we cross the scrub grass field.

Soon I'll leave him and his mom
in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains,
make my way south.
He'll get to know the man
he will someday call dad.

He holds my hand, my finger,
pulls me forward insistently
toward the wood-chip covered playground.

The breeze presses the morning mist
into a drizzle as he shoots down
the green plastic slide,
flashes a smile then runs up
the steps again, short quick steps away from me.

Daycare Blues

Oversized ears
not yet grown into, light in his eyes,
runs head and arms back
like he feels like he's flying, Musa.

Polite; *yes 'um, no ma'am*
Friendly, *you wanna' play trucks?*
Shares with the other kids.

He wet his pants, during naptime.
It wasn't his fault, I told him.
You were sleeping.

We left the room. His head bowed
as the others watched. He pouted
as he tottered to the nurse,
for a change of clothes.

It's not Musa's fault,
I stressed to the nurse
so she could relay it to mom,
maybe save him the spanking.

Musa played by himself that afternoon.
He'd turn his back
when others approached to play.
Instead he built towers of blocks
then knocked them down with a whack.

At 4:00 I watched him mope toward
the grey Oldsmobile his mother drove,
backpack on his shoulders,
plastic bag of smelly laundry in hand.

The next morning
I leaned over, asked if he was ok.

I leaned in closer,
Yus, I'm ok.
I resisted the urge to hug him.

He poked me in the chest,
mind your own business.
And so our day began.

Why They Pray

Today people think of churches as
stuffy old places, where old people
go to pray before dying.
But their church is nothing like that.

It's a place where past and present mix,
organs, electric guitars, and tambourines,
a gilded altar, but a wooden chalice,
a mismatch of churchly paraphernalia
from across the ages, or so it seems.

They enter the Church
late for service. The older daughter
lingers at the entrance.
As the younger daughter
moves into the second-to-last pew,
the father pulls out the kneeler.

I'll just stand, she says,
I'll just stand you,
in a hoarse whisper.
Quickly she moves in.

The father shuts his eyes,
but can't manage a prayer.
Coming to church makes him worry
more, not less about his daughters.

What is coming here
teaching them? Will they blindly
follow some whitened smile
and designer suit into danger
or will they develop
their own set of scales
for weighing the wages of iniquity?

Not coming to church
has its own problems.

But being together they share:
the service, ideas, time,
they talk, have something in common.

He watches them join their voices

to the congregation's in prayer,
then lends his too...*Our Father, who art in heaven...*

For the Poet Salerno and His Mom

The love of y(our) mother
is not a spark of fire
you bore in a bundle.

But you poured it forth
the night you held your wife's hand,
waded into her eyes
and in that moment knew.

Mother's love is not a blaze
that illuminated your words in gold.

But in it you bathed your children
fragile, pink, and yawping,
as you held them for the first time.

Read them "Scruffy the Tugboat"
Taught them to swim,
ferried them and their boxes
to freshman check-in.

With words you showed
her love fills oceans,
lakes, and rivers, rises as mist,
falls as snow and rain
for weeds and gardens alike.

Open Heart

In the spring of 79
my father's heart splayed open
on the operating table.

His old silk stitches had slipped
one by one by one.
Eighteen hours of surgery,
twenty-three pints of blood.

Every night, after interrogating me
about whether I had washed
behind my ears and gotten my back teeth,
my mother would implore me
Say a prayer for Daddy to come home, soon.
I did and he did – a husk of himself.

Sequestered in our row home
for quiet recovery,
I barely saw my father for weeks.
His gaping wounds
seemed to fill our home
pushing everything else, including me
out the windows and doors.

In the backyard, I made space.
I dug furrows as deep as my father's scars
for my grey and green army men,
placed them for a battle that never came.
Those little plastic men had sons too.

The surgery saved dad's life but stole
my first hero, it was months
before he could even walk up stairs.
Dad was home resting when
I hit my only homerun
in three years of little league.

Over time, his scars lost their crimson hue
like lava crusting over. Meanwhile
I got to be his "muscle," took out the trash,
trimmed the hedges, mowed the lawn,
and when he was ready
I was the one to jack up the car
when we changed the breaks.

Doctor's orders kept us from playing catch
instead we spent long mornings
as he taught me secrets –
how to catch bass, blues, and channel cat.

Still all the times we went fishing
were not enough for me at ten
to realize that time with family
is not a given but a gift.

Nightingale

Mine was a home of throaty whispers –
 In the spring of 79;
 urgent open-heart surgery
 to repair my father's aorta.

I knew hours, evenings,
 and overnights
 in the company of Gram
 coloring with nubs of crayons
 or cutting pictures out of magazines
 and newspapers
 or playing monopoly
 with aunts, uncle, and cousins
 while mom was at dad's side.

He came home still needing months
 of recovery, of nursing.
 And Mom was there,
 taking care of his every need,
 of my every need, getting me up
 and out for school,
 making sure homework was done.
 She read bedtime stories,
 knelt with me in prayerful thanks
 for the blessing of my father's life,
 sang *Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore*
 or *You'll Never Walk Alone*
 to get me and my little sister to sleep
 while dad could do little more than rest and eat.

In July our family of 4
 became a family of 5.
 The day or two mom was
 at the hospital
 to birth my baby brother
 was a blur, she returned
 still Sandy Nightingale,
 and hid more than she should –
 gauze, bandages, six inch cotton swabs
 used for cleaning drainage ways
 that led deep into dad's chest.
 But her hurt too, worry, stress,
 secreted it all away.
 Some wounds cut deeper

than flesh or bone.

By Christmas mom was worse than worn out,
quieted away with dad, healing.
Proud big brother was changing
Saturday morning diapers,
when the volunteer fire department
brought a used football,
a board game, hand-me-down clothes,
and groceries in two large
gleaming cans into our living room.

Even now, my mother tries
to return that kindness,
adopting families at Christmas,
seeing to someone else's needs, always.

Fishin' Lessons

The line goes
 ZZZZZZZZZZeeeee
 sinker, hook, and bait plunk
 through the silvery surface.

My Dad taught me to fish,
 though I didn't learn so well,
 a failure no doubt
 of the student, never still,
 never in the moment.

*A surgeon's knot is
 the loop, three twists,
 and pull the loose end through.*

Before any trip we'd catch our own bait;
 just after dark we'd soak down the lawn
 with a garden hose until it was ready
 to float away. Later, we'd quiet into the pre-dawn
 with a flashlight and scoop up fat night-crawlers.

*Bait the hook by
 sewing the barbed tip
 though the body segments
 so the fish has to eat the whole
 thing if he wants a meal.*

After long hikes down rutted woody paths
 to hidden outcrops of rock and soil
 shown to Dad by his father, we'd arrive
 at the banks of the river or reservoir,
 mist lingering on vast stretches of open water.

*Fish like warm shoreline
 waters in the morning
 and deeper cold water
 in the heat of the day.*

The secret stillness of place
 held its spell on a boy of eleven
 for only so long. Seeking out
 snakes, lizards, or frogs was more
 exciting than the fish.

*Look for underwater logs
or rocks and plants.
Fish like places to hide.
Above all be patient,
fish have to find your bait.*

For a long time “our”
failure to catch fish was disappointing.
But there were unspoken lessons
that I did not recognize until later.

*Certain fish, certain bait.
Bass want something live,
Crappie like it juicy and wiggling,
Catfish 'll eat almost anything.*

I recall getting home sans fish.
Dad would look at me and tell mom
“too twitchy to fish,” but those lessons
he taught about what he knew and felt,
were worth more than any fins, gills, or scales.

Explaining Poetry to My Father

It's like drilling holes in steel.
Gather your tools: punch, hammer, drill,
bit, ruler, marker, and file.
Measure and measure again.

Mark the spot and strike
the punch so the bit won't slip
from the plate as you drill.

Take your time, start with a "pilot hole."
You can't force it or the bit snaps under
too much weight, let the drill work.

Don't rush, drill slowly
or you'll spin the bit
into a glowing orange
as dull as a thumb.

Clear the twisted shards of metal.
You are still not done
when the hole is through.

File down the edges
so it won't snag or cut. Polish it,
making it look good is part of the job.

Step back, admire your work;
push the piece aside
as you prepare to drill the next hole better.

Yeah it's like that Pop,
writing poems is just like that.